

## CORRESPONDENCE.

[*Correspondents are requested to write briefly and to the point. No attention will be paid to anonymous communications.*]

## The Popular Names of Birds.

TO THE EDITORS OF THE AUK:—

Sirs: The 'powers that be,' I understand, are preparing a 'Check List,' and revising the scientific and *popular* names of our birds.

There is no doubt that scientific names are entirely in the hands of scientists, but it seems to be overlooked that popular names are just as completely in the hands of the people. Scientists may advise, but not dictate on this point. A short analysis of the principle of common names may place the matter in a new light.

A bird's name, to be popular, must be distinctive, and in accordance with the genius of our language. Examples of such are Thrush, Rail, Heron, Hawk, Crane, Night-Jar, and many others. These are truly popular names, evolved originally out of a description, handed down and condensed and changed until they have assumed their present terse, abrupt, and, to a foreign ear, uncouth forms, but, nevertheless, forms in accordance with the pervading spirit of the Saxon tongue; or, in other words, they are *really* popular.

On the other hand, look at the so-called popular, but really translated, scientific or spurious English names given to our birds, taking as examples the following: Baird's Bunting, Leconte's Sparrow, Wilson's Green Black-capped Flycatching Warbler, Bartram's Sandpiper, Sprague's Lark, Wilson's Thrush, Black Ptilogonys, Semipalmated Tattler, Fasciated Tit, Florida Gallinule, etc.

Surely, the gentlemen whose names are applied to these birds have not so slight a hold on fame as to require such aids as these to attain it, if indeed aids they be, which I question; for such nomenclature *cannot* stand the test of time.

If you show to an 'out-wester' the two birds mentioned above as Baird's Bunting and Leconte's Sparrow, and tell him that these are their names, he will probably correct you, and say one is a 'Scrub Sparrow,' the other a 'Yellow Sparrow.' Convince him that he is wrong, and in a month he will have forgotten all but the names he formerly gave them; they are so thoroughly appropriate and natural that they cannot be forgotten. The next name in the list above given is clumsy enough to strangle itself with its own tail. A lad on the Plains once brought me a *Neocorys spraguei*, and asked its name. I replied that it was Sprague's Lark. Soon afterward he came again; he could not remember that name; so I told him it was a 'Skylark,' and he never forgot that. On the Big Plain that seed was sown, and not all the scientists in America can make, or ever could have made, the settlers there call that bird anything but 'Skylark.' And I consider that lad precisely represented the English-speaking race; he rejected the false name, and readily remembered the

true one, and was aided by that which was apt and natural. No better illustration could be given of the fact, that phraseology may be the life or death of a cause, according as it is happy or unfortunate.

A similar instance is the case of 'Bartram's Sandpiper.' Ever since Wilson's time this name has been continually thrust into the face of the public, only to be as continually rejected; 'Upland Plover' it continues to be in the east, and 'Quail' on the Assiniboine, in spite of Bartram and Wilson, and will continue so until some name, answering all conditions, is brought forward; for here, as elsewhere, the law of the survival of the fittest rigidly prevails. As an example of the fit ousting the false, note how, in spite of scientists, 'Veery' is supplanting 'Wilson's Thrush' throughout the length and breadth of the land.

The spurious English names scarcely need comment, they so evidently contain in themselves the elements of their own destruction. Imagine a western farmer being told that a certain songster was a 'Ptilogonys.' In spite of the books, the other three examples cannot hold ground against 'Willet,' 'Ground Wren,' and 'Waterhen,' respectively.

The purpose of a Check List that includes English names is, I take it, not to attempt the impossible feat of dictating to our woodmen what names they shall give their feathered friends, but rather to preserve and publish such names as are evolved in the natural way,—names which are the outcome of circumstances. Only in case of egregious error is a common name to be superseded; and in doing this it must be remembered that no name can be popular unless true to the principles of the English tongue. It must be short, distinctive, and, if possible, descriptive. Of this class are Veery, Junco, and Vireo. These are the only successful artificial names that I can at present recollect. Among natural English names for American birds are Bobolink, Chewink, Kingbird, and many others. Such as these not only more than hold their own, but are as great aids to the spread of knowledge as the Ptilogonys kind are hindrances; while such as Wilson's Thrush can only be accepted as provisional, until the better knowledge of the bird and its surroundings shall result in the evolution of an English name founded on true principles.

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Toronto, March 21, 1885.*

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## NOTES AND NEWS.

THE determination of the place and date of the next meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union having been referred by the Union to the Council, the Council has decided upon New York as the place, and the third Tuesday in November (Nov. 17) as the date, of the meeting for 1885.